Murder Can Be Fun

No. 14 — $2.95

Please Mr. Postman

Don't Shoot!

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These last few months -- ok, the last year -- has been pretty exciting. The part of Oakland that didn't burn down in the fire (a beautiful one!) has turned into a shooting gallery. In a heartwarming display of civic unity, Oaklanders of all stripes are working in unison to shatter the civic homicide record. Over in San Quentin, the state reinstituted capitol punishment with a bang by executing Robert Alton Harris, surely the first man to die in the gas chamber for eating a hamburger. And of course, you know about LA and possibly even SF's lame-o (in contrast!) sympathy riot. But rather than flog these well-decomposed equines, I'd like to share some fun stuff from the MCBF mailbag.

The first item comes from the "Mail" section of *The Nose* magazine (a fine publication well worth the $12 for a year's worth from 1095 Market Street/ SF, CA 94103). Those fine folks reprinted "Waiting In Line To Die" (MCBF #13) sans the afterword. This editorial decision put the article over the head of at least one Dallas reader. Witness the following letter to the editor.

What on earth was the point of John Marr's "Waiting in Line to Die? I'm hoping it was a joke. Please tell me this is satire, because never have I read such ridiculously over-zealous, melodramatic, lop-sided, biased crap in my life. When I say never, I mean this is the first time I've ever been so annoyed by an article that I've written about it.

Not that I think Disney is beyond reproach; far from it. But to blame the park for the death of Mark Maples, a kid that had shown suicidal tendencies previously that night, would be like blaming Ginsu if he'd slit his wrists. There are signs all over the Matterhorn begging the riders not to stand up. With all due respect to the dead, it was an incredibly stupid thing to do on his part and, of course, it cost him his life.

The majority of the "sheep being led to the slaughter" (please!) cited in this journalistic travesty died because they were where they were clearly not supposed to be; Phil Straughan, for instance. I am appalled at John Marr's reporting of this event. He dismissed the fact that Straughan had stolen a raft and was in an area illegally by calling it "an innocent display of youthful spirits." So am I to understand that if an 18-year old breaks into a house and steals a TV, that it's nothing to worry about, just "youthful spirits"?! Am I further to understand that Disney is supposed to anticipate the actions of such an idiot? Come on, Mr. Marr, what are you saying, that it's Disneyland's fault that people do stupid things in the park, that Disneyland should "stupid-proof" its rides? There are still people who haven't figured out digital watches, for Christ's sake. How's a designer supposed to work around people who thing the rules don't apply to them, the ones who have to stand up, sneak in, or what have you?

And for God's sake, what kind of journalism is this?! "Undoubtedly driven to his fate by irresistible media hype..."? So Disney's also guilty of hypnotizing people through the TV? Well, that'd explain a few thing about the public "success" of Operation Desert Storm, I suppose... "Park guest aren't the only ones seduced to their deaths by the park's attractions," "But to place yourself at the mercy of Disneyland is to risk mangling, mutilation, and death," "....instituting an era of càrnage that continues even today." This is serious, unbiased, responsible journalism?

Granted, some of the incidents reported were in fact tales of negligence and fatal design flaws: Dollie Young, Rick Yama, and especially the deaths of Deborah Stone and Mel Yorba. But again I ask, what's the point of this article? An expose of Disneyland's seedy side? Please, leave that to the professionals over at the *Enquirer*. There isn't any history of behind-the-scenes "death and carnage" here. Let's face reality, gang, ANY amusement park that's been open for nearly FORTY YEARS is going to have its share of mishaps. This doesn't make them any less

tragic, but it's hardly news. Why not pick a freeway and write about how the guys that poured cement are responsible for every car wreck that's occurred on it? Or how the "irresistible media hype" of the beer companies is the direct cause of alcoholism? People are responsible for their own actions, gentlemen. It's easy to blame your fuck-ups on a faceless corporation, but in the end, YOU were the one that stood up where it said sit down, climbed the fence when you could've paid at the gate, and YOU are the one that'll wind up dead wrong. [letter goes on here to praise *The Nose*'s more responsible contributors]

...even though "Waiting in Line to Die" is one of the worst pieces of "journalism" I've ever read, I'm still slapping down my $12 for a subscription. So there.

The publisher loved that penultimate sentence.

Our next example, oddly enough, also comes from Texas, this time Arlington. When people ask me for info on MCBF subs, back issues, and such, I send them a little flyer that weighs a lot less than an ounce. So, to bulk things up, I toss in a few bonus items -- stickers people send me, spare datebook pages, and other fun items. One of my favorite "free gifts" are those great comic book tracts put out by fundamentalist wack-o Jack "This Was Your Life" Chick. This particular correspondent was lucky enough to get a copy of "That Crazy Guy", wherein some wayward slut receives the fitting punishment for those who callously violate God's Law: herpes. And if you saw the guy she did it with, you'd think she deserved it, too.

Dear Mr. Marr:

Thank you for such a prompt response on my request for information. I enjoyed your datebook sample, was surprised that it was based on factual events. However, I was not impressed with the religious booklet you sent along with it.

"That Crazy Guy" only proves what hypocrites religious fanatics can be. Supposedly "God created all people equal" and supposedly we are to "do unto other as you would have them do unto you," yet this booklet shows what prejudices lie amongst the same people that preach the above. It also shows how they would like to be in command of other's lives, rather than allowing people to make their own choices. And I could bring up several more arguments against this booklet.

Unaware that you were involved with such policies, I would like to request that you do not send me any more such information.

I just thought the tract was a suitable warning about guys who drive customized vans. Golly, I'm so glad there are people to catch me when I err.

That about wraps it up for this time. A new DATEBOOK should be out in September. At $2.50 for 365 all-new, all-different morbid events, it will be the usual bargain. MCBF #15 should follow sometime thereafter, depending on my state of mind and capacity for obsessive research.

-JM

Murder Can Be Fun is published on an irregular and erratic basis by John Marr. All contents are copyright 1992 by John Marr, mainly because he wrote every last word of 'em. Sample copies, future copies, and what have you are available at $1.50 each (with generous discounts given on truckload lots!) and the inevitable Datebook is $2.50. What every American Home needs: Most back issues are still in print. Write for prices. The usual suspects include DV, MR, CR, R/S, JP, KC, KB, the PSers, the SOMBs, and everyone else whose ear has been bent by my rants about postal workers, riots, and train wrecks these last several months. front cover illustration by Maxwell Malice

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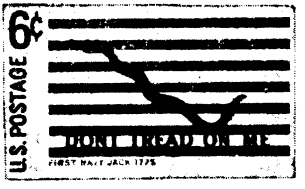
PLEASE MR. POSTMAN

DON'T SHOOT



Pity the poor postal worker. Nobly they make their appointed rounds in spite of the tacky polyester-blend blue shorts they are forced to wear and the horrible conditions, ranging from snow to sleet to the gloom of night, that await them. Nonetheless, they are universal targets of abuse. Blue-haired widows, upset over a 24-hour delay in the delivery of their social security checks, sick their ill-mannered poodles on innocent letter carriers. Poorly applied staples and occasional used hypodermic syringes "found loose in the mails" rip at the flesh of mail handlers. Frenzied SSI recipients lunge at general delivery counter clerks quivering behind barriers of bullet-proof glass. And everyone, from the most senior Senator in Washington to the drunk at the corner bar, rants and raves over paying a few pennies more for a first class stamp.

Yet these threats from outside pale next to the dangers that lurk on the other side of the counter. For all the excitement, nothing serious happens after a rate increase. A few high level scapegoats are terminated; the counter staff is abused when the supply of 4-cent stamps gives out. The octogenarian's poodles may have sharp teeth, but they aren't rabid, and the street schizophrenics are seldom armed with more than their own delusions. The same, however, cannot be said of the postal workers themselves.

Over the last 12 years, USPS employees have taken to packing every manner of gun from .22 pistols to AK-47s, as well as bombs, hand grenades, and samurai swords. And their targets aren't vicious dogs or irate customers. Rather, they are their poplin-clad brethren, as USPS mailrooms have turned into the killing fields of American industry. Bullets have flown in post offices from New Orleans to Boston; blood has soaked the mails from San Diego to Manhattan as berserk postal workers seek vengeance for personal and professional slights, real or imagined.

The current cycle began inauspiciously enough in New Orleans in 1980. Unlike so many of those to follow, 34-year old Curtis Collins was a new employee. His career was not off to a great start. He'd been having problems with his supervisor, Adrienne Wharton. She'd reprimanded him

Selling Stamps | Collecting Mail | Sorting Mail | Sorting Packages | Cancelling Letters

Manual Letter Sorting | Electric Letter Sorting | Truck Loading | Mail Delivery | Rural Mail Delivery

and refused to give him a night off; he retaliated by slashing her tires. In all, it was a fairly routine case of manager/employee strife. In private industry, undoubtedly it would be destined to end with one or both transferred or terminated. But this was the USPS and Collins wasn't about to passively wait out the natural course. Instead, he struck the first blow for rank and file postal workers everywhere.

A few days later, he marched into the mailroom armed with a M-2 rifle. In front of his horrified co-workers, he knocked Wharton down. As she helplessly laid in front of him, he shot her six times. She was dead at the scene. While fleeing, he exchanged gunfire with a security guard and wounded him. The guard, however, managed to riddle Collins's car with bullets and injure him slightly.

Police arrested Collins almost immediately at a nearby local hospital where he sought treatment for the gash on his arm. Unfortunately, they transferred him to the same hospital where Wharton's husband had been taking after collapsing over the news of his wife's death. Suddenly revitalized at the sight of his wife's killer, he lunged at Collins. Police had to restrain him as his friends and neighbors screamed at Collins, "You murdering dog, you ought to be dead!".

Collins was but a pioneer. The elements of the classic postal rampage didn't begin to come together until 1983. The place was Johnston, South Carolina, a peaceful small town distinguished only by its "Peach Capitol of the World" claim.

The chain of event that would forever shatter this calm, bucolic atmosphere began in May, 1983 when long time postal worker Perry Smith resigned from his job. Evidently, he had been having problems with postmaster Charles McGee; Smith had been suspended at least once for

tardiness and there were hints of personality clashes between him and the postmaster.

August 19 was a bittersweet day for McGee. It was his last day in Johnston; he was transferring to the postmaster job at a post office in a larger town. Smith, however, had his own ideas how to bid McGee farewell. Undoubtedly contrasting McGee's promotion with the ignominious end to his own career, Smith marched into the post office that morning armed with an automatic shotgun. He ordered all six employees freeze. No one obeyed. Everyone ran, with Smith in hot pursuit, blazing away with his gun. He injured a letter carrier with one shot, but didn't let this distract him from his primary target: Postmaster McGee.

McGee fled into a neighboring convenience store and tried to hide in the storage room. Smith followed him, and killed the cornered man with two shotgun blasts. Ignoring 3 postal workers huddled in a nearby bathroom, he went back outside shooting "like he was picking off rabbits". He injured another clerk and an off-duty cop before surrendering a few minutes later.

It wasn't until 1985 that postal workers finally upped the ante to true multicide. Murder was already in the air of the main Atlanta post office sorting room that March 6. Mail handler Bettye Eberhart had been strangled at home by her husband the previous week. A popular worker in the sorting room, many of her former comrades still wore black ribbons in her memory.

But one sorter, Steve Brownlee, seemed to take her killing especially hard. He wasn't satisfied with just a symbolic black ribbon. Co-workers remembered him muttering "Somebody must pay for Bettye's dying." They didn't take him seriously. Although he had a history of mental problems, he hadn't caused any trouble during his 12 years with the Postal Service. He struck people as more of a quiet, harmless loner than a suppressed, homicidal wacko.

However, on the fateful day, Brownlee proved that still waters run deep. At the start of his shift on the mail sorting machine, he pulled a .22 handgun and killed a fellow sorter with one shot. Strolling around the machine, he killed his supervisor with a single bullet to the head. He then shot and injured another sorter, a mute employee classified as handicapped. By then, the security guards had arrived. They subdued him without any further gunplay. He was eventually found not guilty by reason of insanity and committed to the state mental hospital.

When most people think of postal massacres, a certain town in Oklahoma springs to mind, a mid-sized post office terrorized by a truly crazed gunman. And for good reason. Not only is Patrick Sherrill's August 20, 1986 rampage through the Edmond post office the worst massacre in postal history, it's also the worst workplace shooting in US history. The incident has resonated through rank & file of the postal service ever since. When postal workers think of killing each other, they turn to the beatific example Patrick Sherrill for inspiration. Ever since, "Edmond, Oklahoma" has become the rallying cry, if not the mantra, of the disgruntled postal employee everywhere.

At 44, Patrick Sherrill epitomized the disaffected postal worker. He was truly terrible at delivering mail and was on the verge of being fired. A surviving letter carrier recalled "he couldn't even find the Wal-Mart, and that's the biggest store in town." He had no friends at work.

He was a similar hit off-duty. Never married and extremely sensitive about his premature baldness, he lived alone in a house that didn't even have an extra chair for a visitor. Neighborhood kids nicknamed him "Fat

Alleged Rampages by Postal Employees
1980 - 1992

	-Employees-		-Civilians-		
	Killed	Wounded	Killed	Wounded	Suicide?
New Orleans, 1980	1	1	0	0	N
Bloomington, IL 1981	1	0	0	0	N
Cleveland, OH 1983	1	0	0	0	N
Johnston, SC 1983	1	2	0	1	N
Anniston, AL 1983	1	1	0	0	N
Atlanta, GA 1985	2	1	0	0	N
Manhattan, 1985	0	1	0	0	N
Edmond, OK 1986	14	7	0	0	Y
Chelsea, MA 1988	1	0	0	0	Y
New Orleans, 1988	0	3	0	2	N
Boston, 1989	0	0	1	0	N
Escondido, CA 1989	2	1	1	0	Y
Ridgewood, NJ 1991	3	0	1	0	N
Royal Oak, MI 1991	4	5	0	0	Y
Henrico, VA 1992	1	0	0	1	N
Bedford Park, IL 1992	0	1	0	0	N
TOTALS	**32**	**23**	**3**	**4**	**4**

(Assailants are not included in dead and wounded totals. It should be noted that all civilian casualties are either law enforcement officials or intimates of postal workers -- not a single innocent bystander among them.)

Pat" and "Crazy Pat", the latter no doubt due to his engaging habit of roaming through the neighborhood, silently staring at people and peering into windows. His only real source of pride was a two-year stint in the Marines. He liked to tell stories about his Vietnam tour, although USMC records show he never left the continental United States. Ever since his 1966 discharge, he served in the Oklahoma National Guard and competed on their marksmanship team. Even when off-duty, he always wore fatigues.

All the elements of the classic postal massacre were there: anti-social employee, military experience, guns, impending dismissal. It's a wonder the local funeral homes didn't order extra disaster bags when Sherrill started muttering, the week before the shootings, "They'll be sorry. They'll be sorry and everyone's going to know about it. Everybody's going to know".

Sherrill showed up at 7:05 that morning in full postal uniform. In his mailbag he carried a .22 and two .45 pistols, conveniently checked out of the National Guard Armory for "target practice". And that day, everyone wearing blue was a target.

After shooting a few workers outside the building, he burst into the post office with both guns blazing. Everyone was fair game. As he walked through the mail room, he gunned down his co-workers indiscriminately, whether they fled, huddled in their cubicles, or begged for mercy. One supervisor screamed "Get out of here, you crazy son of a bitch." He shot her three times. He shot the wounded as they lay in pools of their own blood. Some workers survived by feigning death, while others managed to lock themselves into the stamp vault.

Sherrill continued his rampage through the sorting area into the lunchroom, where he committed suicide by shooting himself in the head. Besides himself, he killed no less than 14 postal workers, and injured 7

more. The dead included Mike Rockne, the grandson of football coach Knute. Ironically, the supervisor who had disciplined Sherrill survived. He was late to work that day and missed the shooting. Also absent was one worker who'd been on good terms with Sherrill -- he'd questioned her carefully, making sure she wouldn't be on duty that day. All told, in less than 15 minutes, Sherrill had wiped out some 20% of the Edmond postal staff.

Sherrill & Co. show how deep pride in the profession runs in the postal soul. Any threat at losing their hard-won positions in their chosen field is not taken lightly. However, postal workers are only human. Beneath those crisp sky-blue twill exteriors lurk real human beings with real passions. They're not just automations selflessly dedicated to a life of public service. They can be driven into a murderous frenzy for reasons other than impending excommunication.

Dominic Lupoli was one all-too human postal worker. For months, he'd tried to date Lisa Bruni, a fellow worker on the graveyard shift at the Chelsea (Massachusetts) Incoming Mail Center. Bruni, however, wasn't interested. She refused all of his advances and invitations, consistently and persistently. Unfortunately, LuPoli took it the wrong way.

Somehow, he convinced himself she was leading him on for the pleasure of laughing behind his back after each refusal. Laboring under this honest delusion, Lupoli's behavior became increasingly bizarre. He repeatedly promised to "take care" of her. Showing his dedication to his career and desire for advancement, he remarked how his seniority would improve due to her impending "demise".

Bruni was understandably frightened. For the last six months of her life, she'd complained to her superiors about LuPoli. She tried to get herself transferred to another shift, another post office, anything to get away from him. Finally, in June, she wrote a letter to management asking for help before "a dangerous situation results in real harm to me and others... I greatly fear an incident similar to the one in Oklahoma".

Bruni was wrong. It wasn't one bit like Oklahoma. Lupoli wasn't about to be fired, and he had nothing against his other fellow workers -- just her.

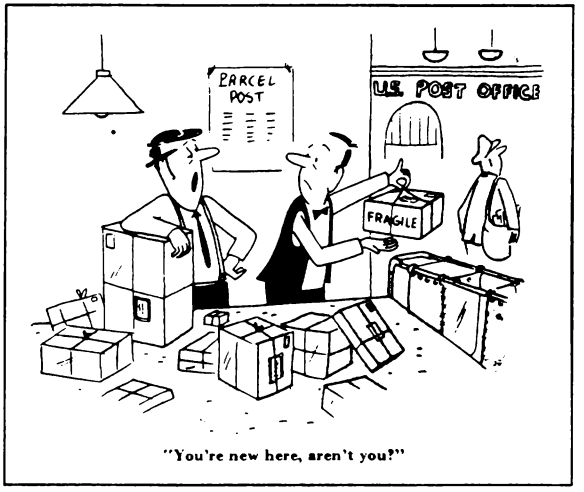
On the night of June 29, 1988, Lupoli waylaid her in the parking lot before her shift and killed her with what police described as "multiple gunshot wounds". He fled the scene, but not before stunned co-workers jotted down his licence plate number.

The police caught up to him less than an hour later. He wasn't about to be taken alive. As they approached his parked car, he blew his head off with his own shotgun.

Lupoli was joined in the USPS Lonely Hearts Rod & Gun Club less than six months later by New Orleans postal worker Warren Murphy. Like Lupoli, the object of Murphy's spurned affections, Carol Smith, worked alongside him in the local post office. Unlike Bruni, Smith reciprocated. She'd lived with Murphy and there was even talk of marriage. It wasn't to be, however. Two months before the shooting started, she broke up with Murphy and moved out.

As postal workers are wont to do, Murphy took it poorly. He became convinced that certain co-workers were making passes at Smith. In his jealousy, he tried to work the same shifts to keep his eye on her. To pass the time on the job, he regaled her with stories about how he'd come into the post office and shoot her would-be lovers as she watched.

Things came to a head on December 14, 1988. On his day off, Murphy marched into the mailroom. A supervisor, undoubtedly shocked by



this un-postal behavior, intercepted him as he walked towards Smith. Murphy pulled a shotgun out of his pants leg and fired a single blast that cost the supervisor an eye and injured two other workers. As the staff fled, he took Smith hostage and holed up in a storeroom for the siege.

Outside of two FBI agents slightly wounded by some stray birdshot, the 13-hour stand-off was fairly uneventful. Murphy finally surrendered when cops pointed out that he was hardly setting a good example for his sons from a previous marriage. Smith was released unharmed and Murphy announced that he was "happy to get the attention of management".

He also got the attention of the legal system. At his trial, the defense painted him as a poor confused fellow, distraught over the double whammy of his ex-wife moving his sons to Washington, DC and Smith breaking up with him. In the words of his attorney, he "had no intention to kill anyone that day. The only person he wanted to die that day was Warren Murphy". He had even asked Smith to do the honors during the siege. The court looked upon this with a jaundiced eye and sentenced him to 16 years on kidnapping and assault charges. After the verdict was announced, Murphy lunged at the prosecutor, screaming "If I wanted to I could have killed someone. I wanted to talk but no one wanted to listen". Evidently, this inability to listen extended to Murphy himself; neither kidnapping or assault require that you actually kill someone, or even make a determined effort.

Alfred Hunter had even less success than Murphy at blowing away his co-workers. During his spree in Boston, not a single drop of Postal Service blood was spilled. But it wasn't for any lack of effort on his part.

May 9, 1989 was a plain rotten day for Hunter. It started in court. A judge sentenced him to a year's probation for an assault and battery charge filed by his ex-wife. At the hearing, she also told the judge that Hunter had threatened her life. Hunter, in return, accused her of using her skill as a "martial artist" to deliver a devastating kick to his stomach, and his so-called assault was but self-defense. He also advised the court that he'd submit to probation as well as he'd obeyed his previous restraining order. In other words, not at all.

He kept his word. That evening, he paid his ex-wife another visit.

In front of their 5-year old son, he made good on his alleged threat by killing her with 7 shots from his trusty AK-47. Leaving the house, he stole a car at gunpoint and drove to the local airport and commandeered a Cessna.

Hunter wasn't a licensed pilot. Nonetheless, he demonstrated more than enough skill to pass any flying test. That night, he treated residents of Boston and environs to a seldom seen display of amateur urban aerial acrobatics. For three hours, Hunter weaved between skyscrapers, flew underneath bridges, and intermittently raked the streets with automatic gunfire. Evidently, he chosen the Cessna because it was thoughtfully designed to be flown with the windows open -- all the better for strafing.

Although Hunter terrorized much of the Boston area, he singled out the South Boston postal facility where he worked for special treatment. Repeatedly, he dove at the building, presumably with his machine gun blazing, only to pull up at the last possible moment. Police expected him to end his airborne rampage with a kamikaze style plunge into the building. Postal workers were ordered to take shelter in the basement -- just like a real air raid!

Such things were not to be. Low on fuel, Hunter landed at a nearby airport and surrendered peacefully. For all the dramatic flourish, his spree didn't produce any casualties beyond his ex-wife. The closest was a tugboat operator who reported being struck by a spent cartridge casing -- testimony to the ineffectiveness of the Cessna as an improvised fighter plane. Hunter was later found incompetent to stand trial.

Perhaps the most unexpected rampaging postal worker was John Taylor. Unlike so many of his fellows, he wasn't faced with dismissal or caught in the throes of an unrequited mailroom romance. From all outward appearances, he was a model employee with a serene personal life. He had been divorced, but had to all outward appearances happily remarried.

His professional life was equally serene. He'd put in 27 solid years working for the Postal Service in the Escondido, a suburb of San Diego. He was only three years from retirement. He was popular and well-liked among the staff, not at all an unbalanced psychotic loner like Sherrill or Brownlee. He was an outstanding worker. He won "Carrier of the Month" and quarterly performance awards so frequently that he'd taken to declining them to give someone else a chance. He was completely dedicated to his job, to the point of skipping his lunch in order to complete his route on time.

But there were hints that behind this facade, Taylor was about to crack. In early August of 1989, he started making lighthearted Pat Sherrill jokes and sarcastic cracks about there not being enough mail even as increasing volume threatened to drown the station. One handler later claimed that Taylor was worried about being fired for theft. If he was worried about this, his fears were groundless. There wasn't even an investigation.

On the morning of August 10, 1989, it happened. Taylor started his day by shooting his wife twice in the head as she slept. Then, following his usual routine, he put on his uniform and drove to the post office. The only difference was that this time, instead his bag lunch, he was carrying a .22 pistol and a box of 100 bullets.

He arrived at the post office 25 minutes before he was scheduled to start his route. Evidently, this was his usual habit. He liked to sit at a picnic table on the loading dock with two fellow letter carriers, sharing a cup of coffee and a few cigarettes before starting his route.

Idle chit chat and office gossip was far from his mind this morning. Instead of asking for a light, Taylor pulled his pistol and opened fire on his erstwhile friends. Both were fatally wounded. He then went inside the building where he'd worked so well for so many years.

One survivor recalled, "He didn't have an emotion. He was stern faced". Another described him as looking "like he was hunting a snake". As his fellow workers frantically scrambled for cover, Taylor peppered the mailroom with an estimated 20 shots, pausing to reload at least once. His marksmanship was far below the form he'd displayed earlier -- only one clerk was injured by a bullet in the arm during the fusillade. Taylor, whatever his reasons, wasn't out to kill everyone wearing blue. For one thing, it was still early and the bulk of the staff hadn't arrived at work. At one point, Taylor even had a bead on a clerk before telling him, "I'm not going to shoot you." Taylor ended his spree a few minutes later with a classic single bullet to the head. In a suicide note discovered later, Taylor wrote that "I've just done what I've had to do."

Taylor was not alone in committing suicide. It was the "in" thing for postal employees to do that year around San Diego. Besides Taylor, no less than four current or recently retired San Diego division workers joined him to make a regular suicide cluster. Three of them, obviously not exhibitionists, chose to hang themselves in the privacy of their own homes. The fourth, Donald Mace, had a flair for the dramatic. He marched into the Palway post office where he worked with a gun. In the middle of the lobby before an appreciative audience, he shot himself in the head.

Comparative calm reigned in the nation's mail rooms for the next two years. But it wasn't the end of a cycle. It was more a case of these public servants gathering their strength and resolve for an orgy of violence forever fused "mass murder" and "postal service" together in the public imagination. Expect 3rd graders in the '90s to describe mailmen as men who "deliver letters, drive blue trucks, and shoot each other."

Ridgewood, NJ is a quiet, yuppie-oriented suburb of New York City. The town has been rated as one of the safest places to live in the country. Working in Ridgewood is a different matter -- especially at the local post office.

In 1989, Carol Ott, a Ridgewood post office supervisor, did the most dangerous thing a supervisor can do: she fired an employee. The victim of her wrath was Joseph Harris, a mail sorter of 8 year's standing. It wasn't as though she didn't have good cause. Harris was far from a stellar employee. He was sullen and unfriendly, and had been formally reprimanded for harassing other workers. His relations with Ott were poor. One postal worker later recalled, "They were like oil and water -- they just didn't mix".

The beginning of the end of Harris's civil service career came when he reportedly threatened Ott. With the support of management, she ordered him to submit to a "fitness for duty" exam, a battery of physical and psychological tests designed to weed out the chance physical or mental cripple slipping through the USPS's rigorous hiring procedure.

Perhaps Harris felt insulted. Maybe he thought a psychological test would invade his privacy, or possibly he had a pretty good idea just how he'd do on these tests and didn't want to waste his time. Whatever his reasons, he refused to take the tests and was fired. The union offered to file a grievance on his behalf. Harris declined. As one union official recalled, "He said he would take care of things his own way".

Thoughts of this unpleasant little episode were probably far from Ott's mind some eighteen months latter. On the night of October 10, 1991, she enjoyed a peaceful evening in the house she shared with her boyfriend

in nearby Wayne, New Jersey. This tranquility was shattered when an intruder forced his way in. He surprised Ott as she apparently prepared for bed and slashed her to death with a sword-like weapon after a brief struggle. The killer also killed her boyfriend, shooting him once in the head as he watched television in the basement.

Early the next morning, an intruder broke into the deserted Ridgewood post office and put into a motion what appeared to be a plan to slaughter a substantial portion of the 120-strong staff. Evidently, at 2 AM he forced the first two mail handlers to arrive at work into a room and fatally shot them. He then waited for his next victims.

A truck driver arriving 15 minutes later was more fortunate. While looking for the normal work crew, he came across the gunman lurking in the basement. His shot missed, allowing the truck driver to escape and call the police.

The first cops to respond were driven back when the gunman threw a small explosive device at them and detonated a second device as they retreated. Neither blast, however, caused injuries or significantly damaged the postal facility.

There were no reports of further explosions or gunfire during the ensuing 5-hour standoff. The siege ended when the police peacefully took Joseph Harris, the suspected gunmen, into custody. Garbed in black fatigues and a Ninja hood, Harris was heavily armed. His arsenal included an Uzi machine gun equipped with a silencer, a samurai sword, at least three hand grenades and some home-made explosives plus a gas mask, hand cuffs, and lock picks. The local police chief commented, "He was armed quite heavily -- more heavily than I've ever seen in my career".

After defusing a booby trap rigged to the door, police searched Harris's apartment. Among other things, they found a note by Harris complaining about his unfair treatment at the hands of the USPS, complete with Edmond, OK references. According to the county prosecutor, the letter "basically indicated that these people are going to pay". Mr. Harris is currently under indictment for his possible involvement with the 4 slayings and should be considered innocent until proven guilty.

A little over a month later, a second discharged postal worker had even more success avenging himself against management. The increasingly familiar story began with Thomas "Mackie" McIlvane being fired from his job in the Royal Oak, Michigan post office in July 1990 for "insubordination". Among other sins, the letter carrier got in trouble for fighting with the customers along his route.

Everything about McIlvane practically screamed, "give this man a mailbag and he'll fill it with guns". He'd served in the Marines. In the Corps, he settled a score with one of his fellows by running over his car with a tank. He was a black-belt martial artist and former pro kick boxer. He won the Detroit "Tough Man" contest, a no-holds-barred fighting competition. And, of course, he was known as having a "short fuse".

Unlike Harris, McIlvane had faith in his union and the grievance process. He restrained himself for almost two years waiting out his appeals. He was convinced he would be reinstated. If not, he vowed that it would be a "sad day in Royal Oak". Invoking patron saint Patrick Sherrill, he also promised "to make Edmond look like a tea party". The stage was set.

The other Royal Oak workers weren't completely unprepared. Even before McIlvane, the Royal Oak post office was racked with poor labor/management relations. Disgruntled workers had thrown phones through the windows and threatened supervisors with knives. And

management wasn't turning the other cheek. Led by branch manager Chris Carlisle, the man who fired McIlvane, they were equally hard-fisted. Carlisle himself had been accused of assaulting an employee while working in Indianapolis post office. The post office was already under Senate investigation before a single shot was fired.

McIlvane's threats were widely known. Workers were warned to keep him out if he showed up. Some, however, took things one step further. They mentally planned out escape routes "just in case".

And it happened on November 14, 1991, the day after McIlvane's final arbitration had gone against him. He strolled into the post office through the loading dock, armed with a sawed-off semi-automatic rifle and opened fire.

For all the warning they had, many workers panicked. Well after the gunfire stopped, police reported finding terror-stricken workers still frozen against walls, futilely hiding behind office plants, or simply curled up on the floor in a fetal ball of terror. Undoubtedly, the pre-planned escape routes worked for some But others, in their terror, jumped out of second floor windows. Three were injured this way.

Fortunately for the rank and file, Mackie's ire -- and fire -- was directed at management. In his 6-minute shooting spree, McIlvane killed four workers and injured four more. The dead, which included branch manager Carlisle, were all supervisors, as were two of the wounded. At one point, McIlvane had his gun at woman's head before he informed her "you're not the one I want" and went off hunting for more supervisors. With his mission presumably accomplished, McIlvane ended his rampage in the usual way with a single bullet to the head, notwithstanding his two remaining clips of ammo and huddled live workers all around.

And the violence shows no signs of abating. 1992 has yet to produce a multicide. But the men in blue are still at it. In a romantic dispute, a lovelorn letter carrier shoot and stabbed a clerk to death in her home and wounded her civilian boyfriend. Elsewhere, another clerk wounded his supervisor with a bullet in the buttocks in an argument over his time card. Yet, even as the intra-Service homicide rate skyrockets, the public at large is safe. For postal workers are wedded to each other and their profession by bonds rivalling those of old-time organized crime. The postal customer is safe. The senior Senators, the blue-haired seniors, even the SSI psychos are all immune from the wrath of postal brotherhood. For, like the gangsters of yore, postal workers only kill each other.

The first difficulty in writing about postal homicides is definitions. Where do you draw the line? Sherrill must be included, along with anyone who ever opened fire in a mailroom. But what about a postal worker who slaughters his family? What if his wife is a fellow USPS employee? And there's David "Son of Sam" Berkowitz. He worked for the Postal Service but practiced his hobby only when off-duty. Shouldn't he be included?

I steered between the two extremes. My first criteria was that the assailant must be or recently been a postal worker. His victims need not be exclusively USPS staffers; however, he must either 1) kill or injure one or more USPS employees; 2) kill a civilian and attempt to kill or injure a USPS employee. Berkowitz is excluded, as are USPS guys who just happen to slaughter their family.

Tracking down all the amok mailmen is easier said than done. Only Sherrill, his more prolific progeny and, oddly enough, Warren Murphy, grabbed national headlines. The rest are hidden in the files of local newspapers. But I thought I had them. It took two months' of searching through almost every major newspaper index plus some clandestinely obtained wire service databank info. It looked complete.

Then I made a contact inside the killing fields themselves. My connection had info on a few killers I'd missed. But I felt vindicated because I had stuff on ones he'd never heard of.

There'll never be a complete list. Given the current homicide rate a and the sheer size of the USPS (750,000 employees) scattered all over the country, it's impossible. But we can try.

Riot On!

I trust all of you found the events of this past May in and around Los Angeles most diverting. I know I did; I was completely distracted for the entire week, listening for the latest totals and rooting for "big 44", the death toll necessary to surpass the 1967 Detroit riot. And I wasn't disappointed. The although the body count reports got as high as 60, as of this writing the official score is 45, just enough to nick the record. I love living through history.

However, lost in all the hoopla, hype, and "How Can This Happen In America" handwringing is the fact that mass violence is, to borrow from one of its frequent advocates Stokey Carmichael, "as American as cherry pie". Mobs have been rampaging continually (although not continuously) throughout American history with a ferocity second to none. The only thing the American mob hasn't done is stage a full-scale insurrection. The White House, Congress, even state capitol buildings have all been immune from the mob's wrath. Everything else has been fair game. Mobs have battled the police, the militia, and each other for reasons ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous. The American mob even has a flair for creativity. If we weren't the inventors of lynching and vigilantism, we certainly were their greatest practicioners in terms of both quantity and style.

Historian Richard Hofstader commented "What is most exceptional about the Americans is not the voluminous record of their violence, but their extraordinary ability, in the face of that record, to persuade themselves that they are among the best behaved and best regulated peoples." The Kerner Commission, in their post-mortem of the '60s riots, christened this phenomena "historical amnesia". It's not that it hasn't happened here; it just hasn't happened recently.

Of course, this is not to trivialize the LA riot in any way (after all, it's the biggest riot of my life) but to put it in perspective. It's not even close to being the worst* in US history. That honor is reserved for the Civil War draft riots discussed below. However, it is the worst of its type: the ghetto riot. A ghetto riot is characterized by mobs of ghetto residents attacking local symbols of authority (e.g., cops, stores). A true race riot, on the other hand, the targets are plainly members of another race. There may be lots of arson, and even some incidental looting, but all by people who don't live in the neighborhood.

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* ---- In the true MCBF tradition, "big" and "major" riots mean big body counts. Those niggling bottle throwing window smashing sprees just don't cut it.

The ghetto riot seems to be the only surviving form of large-scale American mob violence. Lynching and vigilantism are dead. The last labor massacre was in 1937. Major race riots went out with World War II. Other forms of mass internecine violence (political, religious, ethnic) are also all but gone. Can you picture masses of Clinton, or even Perot supporters attacking and actually killing some Republicans? And support for full-scale revolution continues to be the exclusive property of the lunatic fringe.

But who knows? American rioting has always been characterized by its episodic nature, with clusters of major riots separated by years, if not decades, of tranquility. The American mob can come back at any time. Just consider this selection of a dozen of some of the worst and/or weirdest riots in US history. It can happen again.

The Worst Riot

New York Draft Riots, 1863: Consensus choice as the worst riot in US history. Disorder was sparked by the newly instituted draft, with its $300 buy-out provision. This incensed the predominantly Irish Democrat lower classes. They didn't have the money, thought the war was a Republican plot and figured freed slaves would head North and take their jobs. So they rioted. Action started when a mob stormed and burned a building housing the draft board. Things snowballed from there. For four days, 70,000 rioters, in mobs numbering up to 10,000, rampaged through Manhattan. Targets included mansions of the rich, government offices, and freed slaves; many blacks were lynched and the Colored Orphan Asylum torched. Order was finally restored with the help of Union troops fresh from Gettysburg. They used cannons. The final death toll is uncertain, as the burial permit office was closed in the wake of the riots and many victims were simply tossed in the river. **Estimated Score: 300 - 1,000 dead**

Race and Ghetto Riots

East St. Louis Riot, 1917: Racial tensions, exacerbated by the use of black strikebreakers, exploded after blacks accidentally shot a police detective in retaliation for white drive-by gunfire. White mobs, chanting "Get a nigger, get another", went on a day-long rampage through the black district, beating, killing, and burning with minimal police interference. **Official Score: 48 dead.**

Tulsa Riot, 1921: To prevent a rumored lynching of a black man accused of criminal assault of a white woman, a group of armed blacks gathered in front of the jail. Gunfire broke out between the blacks and a white mob (the intended lynchers?) led by the American Legion and they retreated to the ghetto. The ensuing riot was more like a war, as the heavily armed white mob laid siege to and invaded "Little Africa" and burned 30 square blocks to the ground. Some of the wilder accounts claim the whites were armed with machine guns, used planes for reconnaissance, and even did a little aerial bombing. The authorities took advantage of the diversion to spirit the accused assailant to safety. Probably the worst riot of the 20th century so far. **Score: 31 announced officially, but 85 is much more likely. Estimates run as high as 250.**

Detroit Riot, 1943: An interesting combination of the traditional race riot and the modern ghetto riot. A fight between a black and a white at the

continued....

——SCENES FROM AME

DRAFT RIOTS, 1863: A mob, with more taste than present day counterparts, loots the Brooks Brothers store in downtown Manhattan.

DRAFT RIOTS, 1863: Rioters fight it out with the police in front of the *New York Tribune* building.

RICA'S RIOT ALBUM

POLICE RIOT, 1857: New York's Municipal police fight it out with Metropolitan police in front of City Hall. Although the Municipals win the battle, they will lose the war.

ORANGE RIOT, 1871: "Orangemen" and their police/militia escort marching on 8th Avenue. The only Orangeman visible in this picture is the mounted man near the pennant; the protectors outnumbered the marchers almost sixty to one.

Belle Island amusement park gave rise to rumors among whites of a black man raping a white woman and among blacks of white sailors drowning a black woman and her baby. Blacks responded by smashing store windows and looting stores while mobs of whites roamed the streets attacking blacks. **Official Score: 34 dead.**

Detroit Riot, 1967: The crown jewel of the "Long Hot Summer" of 1967 and by far the worst of the estimated 160 riots during that amazing year. (Incidentally, most of the riots were minor incidents with no fatalities. 80% of the year's death toll was in Detroit and Newark). The riot began after police raided some ghetto "blind pigs" (illegal after hours drinking & gambling clubs). Crowds gathered and started throwing stones at police, and then at store windows. Things snowballed in the classic ghetto riot tradition: the stores were looted, and then burned, a few snipers went into action, and the National Guard was called in. Riot lasted six days, and inspired much smaller "sympathy riots" in eight nearby towns over the next two weeks. The Kerner Commission Report roundly criticized the National Guard's trigger happy approach to restoring order and suggested they would have been more effective if they hadn't been issued bullets. **Official Score: 43 dead.**

Ethnic & Religious Riots

Haun's Hill Massacre, Missouri, 1838: A mob, acting in the spirit of the governor's opinion that "the Mormons must be treated as enemies and must be exterminated or driven from the state, if necessary, for the public good", attacked a Mormon settlement, indiscriminately killing men, women, and children. The Mormons took this as a sign that they'd worn out their welcome and fled to Carthage, IL. Six years later, yet another mob would lynch founder Joseph Smith and his brother. **Estimated Score: 18 dead.**

Louisville Know-Nothing Riot, 1855: Members of the American (Know-Nothing) Party took over the polls at dawn on election day to prevent non-Know-Nothings, primarily German immigrants, from voting. Voters thus denied did not take this lightly, and the day was marked by widespread brawls, gunfire, and arson. **Estimated Score: 18 dead.**

Orange Riot, New York, 1871: A group of 100 Irish Protestants ("Orangemen"), marching down 8th Avenue in celebration of the Ulster equivalent of St. Patrick's Day, were fired upon by Irish Catholics. That this attack was not entirely unexpected is demonstrated by the size of their escort: 700 police and 5000 militia. The escort returned fire and the riot was on. **Official Score: 43 dead.**

Miscellaneous and Fun Riots

Ursuline Convent, Charleston, Massachusetts, 1834: A nun had fled the convent after suffering a mental breakdown. Although she voluntarily returned two weeks later, rumors flew about the abuses she'd suffered and her "forced" return. A mob gathered and burned the convent to the ground, even after the renegade nun herself assured them she wasn't being held prisoner. For good measure, the mob returned the next night to burn down the fences, gardens and everything else they missed the first time. **No known fatalities.**

Astor Place Riot, New York, 1849: A nativist mob, 10 - 15 thousand strong, rioted in front of the Astor Place Theater during the second performance of a production of "Macbeth" starring a British actor. The nativists objected to British aristocracy, which they saw exemplified by British actors, and had halted the opening night show by bombarding the stage with "rotten eggs, potatoes, and chairs". The militia fires on the crowd to disperse them. **Official Score: 31 dead.**

Police Riots, New York, 1857: Lots of police/mob clashes get tagged "Police Riots", albeit only by the rioters and their sympathizers. This one, however, everyone agrees on. New York City's Municipal Police had become so corrupt the legislature ordered them replaced with the newly established Metropolitan Police. The Mayor refused to comply. In an unsuccessful attempt to enforce the act by arresting the mayor, the Metropolitans fought a pitched battle with the Municipals in and around city hall that left 51 cops (both varieties) injured. For the next few months, New Yorkers had to contend with two rival police forces more interested in harassing each other than enforcing the law. This confused situation went on for the next few months before the mayor bowed to a court order and disbanded the Municipals. **No known fatalities.**

Cincinnati Riots, 1884: The public, having grown increasingly resentful over perceived corruption and laxness of the justice system, rioted after a murderer got 20 years instead of the death penalty. In a lynch attempt, a mob stormed and burned the jail. Of course, authorities had already slipped the killer out of town. The mobs rampaged for two more days and burned down several other buildings, including the courthouse. The militia used Gatling guns to restore order. **Estimated Score: 50 dead.**

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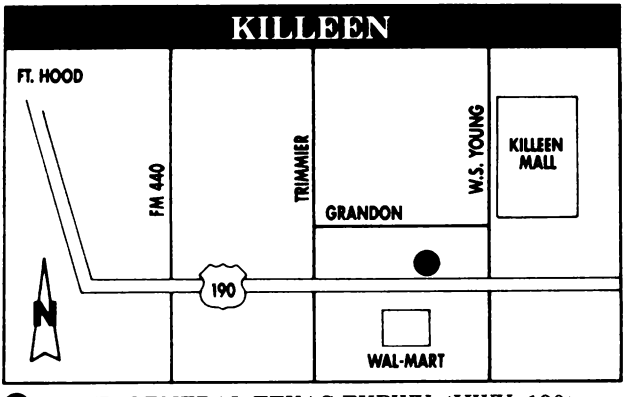

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A FUTURE NATIONAL MONUMENT: Official directions to site of George Hennard's record-setting 1991 22 victim shooting spree.

The Nashville Train Wreck

The most astonishing thing about the Dutchman's Bend train wreck of July 9, 1918 is its almost complete obscurity. Although its official death toll of 101 makes it the worst wreck in US rail history*, no one likes to talk about. It's like people are trying to ignore it, in the theory that it will go away. When Americans reminisce about great national railroad mishaps, they never mention Nashville or Dutchman's Bend. Instead, it's ballad train wrecks like "Casey Jones" (only 1 dead), "01 '97" (9 dead) or commuter train crashes like the Long Island Railroad's 1950 duo (31 & 79 dead respectively).

Maybe we're embarrassed that our railroads can barely manage to knock off a hundred in a single shot. The French can point with pride to 543 dead at Modane, 1917. The Italians managed to asphyxiate 426 people in a tunnel at Salerno in 1943 without so much as denting a piece of rolling stock. The British fondly recall the 1915 Gretna Green head-on collision which killed 227. Even New Zealand outclasses us; a bridge washed out in 1953 just in time to catch the Wellington/Auckland express and take out 166 Kiwis.

Nonetheless, Dutchman's Bend is our heritage. It deserves to be reclaimed from scattered newspaper filler items and the yellowing pages of ICC reports. It still is a shamefully neglected disaster.

In 1917, the Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis railroad line was double tracked from the downtown Nashville depot out to Shops Junction on the outskirts of the city. The next 4.3 miles from Shops to Harding, the next station, had only a single track to carry traffic in both directions.

The trains of interest were No. 1, an inbound Memphis/Atlanta express, and No. 4, an outbound local. These were regularly scheduled trains. Normally, No. 1 would leave downtown Nashville at 7:00 AM, 10 minutes before No. 4's scheduled arrival. Keeping to this schedule, they'd pass each other on the double tracks before No. 4 switched over to the single track at Shops.

The Federal Government had taken control of the railroads as World War I raged. But even they could-

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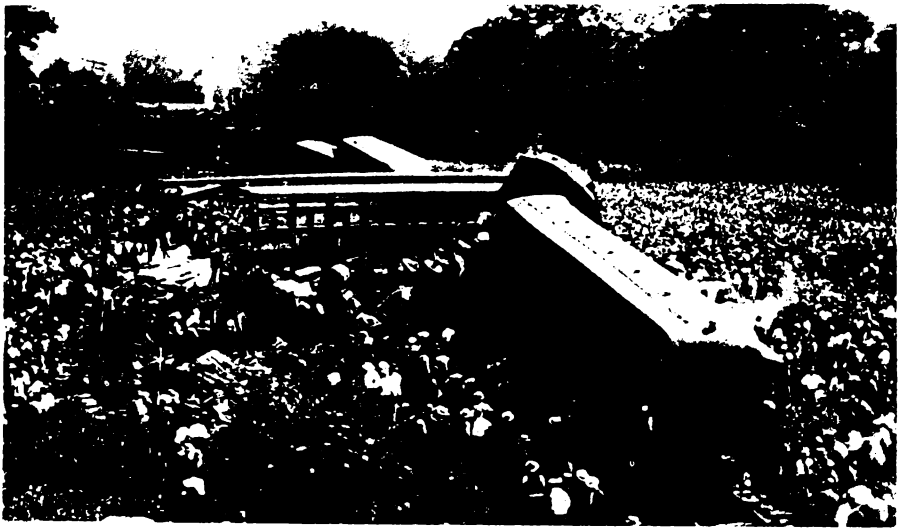
*-- I have my qualms about accepting the 101 figure. See below.



n't make the trains run on time. Train schedules, then as now, were more idealistic visions of a better world than a true portrayal of reality. On that July 9 morning, No. 4 pulled out of Nashville 5 minutes late, carrying its usual load of primarily black laborers heading to work at the munitions plants outside of town. However, unveknownst to the crew of No. 4, No. 1 was running ½ hour behind schedule. The stage was already set for disaster.

Of course, all hope was not lost as No. 4 left Nashville for its rendevous with destiny. Inbound trains had the right-of-way. So, it was normal practice for the outbound No. 4 to wait at Shops until the tardy No. 1 cleared the junction. To facilitate this, No. 4 would be issued orders at Nashville. On the fatefull morning, the order read, "No. 4 engine 282 hold main track, meet No. 7, engine 215, at Harding. No. 1 has engine 281". The implication here was for the crew of No. 4 to keep their eyes peeled for locomotive #281 before entering the single track.

This is a hell of a way to run a railroad. Not only is the order kinda vague on the fact that you'd better stop at Shops if you don't spot No. 1, but it also requires the crew to play "spot the locomotive", which can get kind of trciky at night or in the fog. The weather that day was clear; however, this poorly conceived order was definitely a major cause of the crash.

Conductor Eubank of No. 4 claimed he diligently conveyed the order to his crew & discussed it with his engineer. He was under the impression that everyone knew they would have to stop at Shops until No. 1 passed.

Eubank they turned his attention to more pressing matters -- like collecting tickets. The train was crowded that morning, so he was distracted the entire time

between Nashville & Shops. He did hear a train passing in the opposite direction as he worked, but couldn't see it. After all, he had an entire crew looking for No. 1. Meanwhile, the flagman (who later denied having instructions about No. 1) watched a switching locomotive pull 8 or 10 cars back towards Nashville.

The tower operator at Shops came on duty at 7:07. Eight minutes later, as No. 4 passed, he thought to check his train sheet to see if No. 1 had come through. When he saw it hadn't, he frantically pulled on his emergency whistle, but it was too late. No. 4 passed onto the single track. It was now locked onto a collison course with No. 1. There were no 2-way radios, no signals, no way of preventing the now inevitable crash.

The two trains met their fate 2 miles down the line at Dutchman's Bend. The track emerges from a cut near a curve and passes underneath a highway bridge. It's virtually impossible to spot an oncoming train until the last second.

No. 1, moving at an estimated 60 mph, never had time to hit the brakes. No. 4, doing 45 mph, only managed to apply them an instant before the crash.

Both locomotives were knocked completely clear of the track and all but demolished. Both engine crews were killed. No. 4 suffered the worst damage, as all of its cars were of the old fashioned wood variety. Its mail car was impaled by No. 1's baggage car and its own baggage car telescoped by a passenger car, which was in turn partially telescoped by another passenger car. No. 4's last three cars managed to stay on the track & were only slightly damaged.

No. 1's baggage car was almost completely destroyed in smashing No. 4's mail car. Two coaches derailed and caught fire. Its last three cars, the only steel cars in the accident, weren't derailed and were virtually unscathed.

The initial report in the NEW YORK TIMES was headlined "100 Killed, 100 Hurt In Train Wreck". The next day, the railroad's preliminary fatality list in hand, they cut back to 89 dead (34 white, 55 black) and 56 injured. They also pointed out, helpfully, that "Most of the white persons killed were in the smoking car" of No. 4. The St. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH was more enthusiastic in their initial report: "Latest reports indicate 50 white persons and 65 negroes were killed and more than 100 injured". The final ICC report put the death toll at 101 (87 passengers, 14 employees) with 101 injured (87 passengers, 14 employees).

The ICC, quite properly, blamed Conductor Eubank for his failure to put his responsibility for train safety ahead of his duty to collect fares. They couldn't figure out why the engineer of No. 4, an expreienced worker intimately familiar with the run, failed to verify the passage of No. 1 before passing Shops. Either he also mistook the switching train for No. 1, or Conductor Eubank wasn't as clear as he claimed in conveying the order to him.

Although Eubank plainly deserved censure, the ICC didn't overlook the slipshod way the railroad was running things at the junction. "Spot the locomotive" is plainly inadequate. At the very minimum, the commission recommended maintaining a train register at shops, with outbound trains required to stop, check the register and pick up orders advising of the status of inbound trains.

But this is just a bare minimum. Given the heavy traffic over the section and the prescence of the necessary resources, the ICC could see "no valid excuse" for the lack of signals. Block system signals, wherein signals at the end of each track segment are set at "stop" when the segment is occupied, were already common and would have undoubtably prevented the crash.

The ICC concluded "This accident presents a more apalling record of deaths and injuries than any other accident investigated by the Commission since the accident investigation work was begun in 1912". And with these words, the Dutchman's Bend train wreck vanished into the mists of history, save for the occaisonal passing reference in disaster compendium.

Modern day accounts almost invariably attribute the lack of contemporary media coverage (the cause of their own brevity) to racism. As most of the victims were black, no one really cared. However, it doesn't look this way on closer examination.

The wreck happened as World War I was coming to a climax. The last great German offensive was in the process of being halted. The Second Battle of the Marne was starting, & would be followed by Argonne & Ypres. If there had been any military angle -- say a troop train, or a hint of sabotage -- the wreck would have made much more of a media splash. As it was, doughboys being gassed in France made better copy than negoes being smashed in Nashville. Shaw, in DOWN BRAKES (probably the definitive history of US rail mishaps) points out that only 4 days later, an excursion steamer sank on the Illinois River near Peoria, drowning 200, with no more media coverage than Dutchman's Bend. War is hell for disaster coverage. The French even surpressed their unsurpassed achievement at Modane in 1917 out of modesty. Dutchman's Bend just got lost in the shuffle.

BUT REALLY, 101?

There is something funny about the death toll of the wreck. Consider the chronology. The initial news reports of 100 or 115 were just that. Crazed, rushed, to be taken with a grain of salt. The follwing day's NEW YORK TIMES report (89 dead, 56 injured) was probably conservative pending, among other things, deaths among

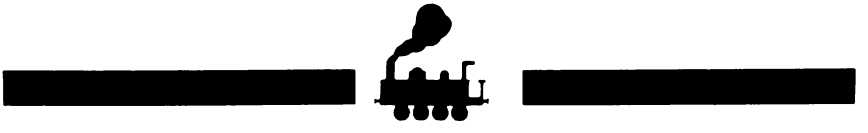
the more severely injured. The next number I dug up comes from industry journal RAILWAY AGE the following week. In an article that appears to be covering an inquiry or inquest, the toll is given as 92 dead (88 passengers, 4 employees) and 88 injured (86 passengers, 2 employees).

RAILWAY continued to use the 92/88 figures in their occaisonal mentions of the wreck through their October 4th issue. Yet, in their October 11th issue, the same issue they reported on the ICC report, they changed to the 101/101 ICC numbers.

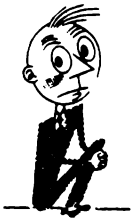
Consider the ICC figues. The perfect split between dead & injured is slightly suspicious, but really only grist for the most far-fectched conspiracy theorist. What really smells is the breakdown: 87 passengers killed, 14 employees killed, 87 passengers injured, 14 employees injured. This 50/50 split starts looking more & more like a typographical or accounting error, especially when you consider the enormous upsurge in the injured total and the fact that the ICC only counted deaths occuring withing 24 hours of the wreck. The long lingering declines just don't make it.

Then there's the total employee casualties -- 28 dead & wounded between the two trains. WHAT ARE 28 WORKERS DOING ON TWO SHORT TRAINS IN THE MIDDLE OF A MANPOWER SHORTAGE? I'm no expert on crew requirements of WWI vintage steam trains, but 28 (& that's not including the unharmed ones!) seems way too high. The only explanation I can think of is that a bunch of railroad men were riding to work -- although I think they should rightfully then be reported as passengers. Unfortunately, the only way I can see resolving this is a trip to Nashville, which is well out of the MCBF travel budget. Until then, I'm leaning towards 92/88. This is good news for all you New Yorkers. If the Nashville wreck is indeed detroned, the 1918 Brooklyn BRT wreck, wherein 97 died when the motorman took a curve too fast, will take the title.

In making the PacBell rounds of Nashville, in an unsuccessfull attempt to get a local angle, a few people mentioned rumors to me of how the crash was actually a minor incident in civil rights history, as people and/or doctors refused aid to the black victims. But, like most beguiling rumours, it remians elusive. A quick scan through all the 1918-vintage black press available to me out here on the left coast revealed nada. There was plenty of stuff on the war, riots, lynchings, & the social doings of the black&tan set, but nary a word about the racist train wreck. This is why I hate rumors -- they never live up to their promise.



The Not-So-Happy World of [redacted]



ROBERT CORMIER

Longtime readers of MCBF are no doubt familiar with my affection for young adult novels. This in no way indicates any arrested emotional development or inability to legally purchase alcohol on my part. The acne years are thankfully well behind me & I read more "grown-up" books than 90% of the literate population. Young adult (YA) novels, for me, are the literary equivalent of TV sitcoms: quick, trashy, & amusing. And, incidentally, about as intellectually demanding. What better to pick up after a long day?

Thus, I overlooked Robert Cormier for many years. I want trash, I want sensationalism, I want sleaze. By these standards, his big hit, THE CHOCOLATE WAR, looks positively dull. A bunch of Catholic preppies get all worked up trying to sell candy for the benefit of dear ol' Trinity. Big deal. No one gets killed, no one gets laid, hell, they even turn in all the money! I passed it over dozens of times in favor of the latest teen anorexia book or enticing titles like TOO BAD ABOUT THE HANES GIRL.

I should have been paying more attention to the censorship newsletters. THE CHOCOLATE WAR is one of the most targetted books of the would be protectors of our youth's (non-existant) precious intellectual fluids over the last 15 years. And it's not for the usual reasons. The bad language is minimal, the sex non-existant. No controversial topics (abortion, Satanism, Communism) are promoted or even mentioned. Instead the Pollyannas are reduced to sputtering about "lack of positive role models" and "unremitting pessimism".

Simply put, Cormier (pronounced Cor'/mē/ehr) is too good to be hogged by the kids. His books pack all the nihilistic wallop of Jim Thompson at his best, with kids hopelessly emmeshed in the web of social institutions gone berserk. Yet the endings, as unhappy as they are, are completely unpredictable. Cromier has a dazzling variety of literary tricks in his bag & you've got to read real close to keep track of all the rabbits popping up. It's a crime that he's on the same shelf as SWEET VALLEY HIGH.

THE CHOCOLATE WAR, Cormier's first YA novel, is his most famous and possibly his best. Action is set at Trinity High School, a parochial boy's day school in New Eng-

land. Unlike most schools of its day (1974), Trinity has not been torn apart by dissent or demonstrations. The reason is the Vigils, an unsanctioned "Secret Society" that effectively dominates the student body.

At the heart of the Vigils is Archie, the "Assigner". The club's major activity is summoning quivering lowerclassmen before them to receive an "assignment" dreamed up by Archie. The assignments are no ordinary tack-on-teacher's-chair style prank. Archie is brilliant, ruthless, and utterly amoral. Just think of what a near sociopath could come up with. There is a check on his power, though. After making the assignment, the Assigner must draw a marble from a box containing 5 white and one black marble. If he pulls the black one, he does the assignment himself. Needless to say, Archie never draws the black one.

Action revolves around the school's annual chocolate sale. Brother Leon, in charge of the sale, has purchased twice the chocaltes at twice the price of years past. He's gunning for the headmaster's job, & he'll stop at nothing to get it. He calls Archie, a like spirit, in to discuss the situation, and requests the help of the Vigils in making the sale a success. This marks the first time any member of the administration had acknowledged the Vigil's existence.

Enter Jerry, a quiet, ordinary, inoffensive freshman. Archie demonstrates his power by assigning Jerry to refuse to sell the chocolates for 10 days. Brother Leon virtually goes into an apoplectic fit. Yet, after the 10th day, for reasons even he can't fully understand, Jerry continues to refuse. The other students, their relatives perilously close to diabetic comas, begin to join in. "Screw the chocolates!". If the sale fails, Brother Leon's goose is cooked -- as are the Vigils, as Archie realizes. He flings the troops into action. Almost overnight, all the chocolates are sold -- except for Jerry's.

But Archie has his own little plan to get rid of the last few. He raffles them off at an unauthorized school rally. The feasture attraction of the rally is a boxing match between Jerry and Emile, a muscle bound animal with whom Jerry has a few scores to settle. But not until the combatants get into the ring do they realize this is no ordinary match. Each purchaser of a raffle ticket gets to specify a blow, say "Emile right uppercut to Jerry's face". The recipient may offer no resistance. And it actually works for a few swings until Jerry instinctively tries to guard against a low blow. Emile goes berserk and, urdged on by the screaming, near rioting crowd, all but beats Jerry to death. Brother Leon has watched the whole spectacle with tacit approval. Only the arrival of another teacher, who turns out the lights, saves Jerry's life. And what is Jerry's advice to his friends as he's hauled away to the hospital, barely concious? "Sell the chocolates".

A little more intense than the HARDY BOYS?

I AM THE CHEESE is equally wild. The novel opens with young Adam Farmer in the middle of a bike trip to visit his father in a Vermont hospital. The trip scenes are intercut with sessions of Adam being questioned by a doctor helping

him recover his memory after some unspecified trauma and flashbacks of Adam's childhood. As the book goes on, things get strange. The bike trip goes increasingly bizarre, in a TWILIGHT ZONE sense, and it becomes obvious that the doctoris more interested in what Adam knows. Adamm's father, it turns out, was in the Federal Witness Protection Program. But who is the doctor? And just where is Adam's father? The interrogation and bike trip eventually collide in a stunningly ambiguous surprise ending that I refuse to ruin. Reportedly, Cormier had taken to sending out an answer sheet to help his young fans puzzle things out. And I, myself, wouldn't mind having one to help tie down a few loose ends.

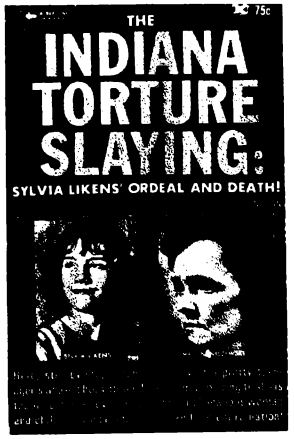
Especially close to my heart (due to its very MCBF subject matter) is AFTER THE FIRST DEATH. A buncha fun-loving conntryless (hell, let's call 'em Palestinian) terrorists take over a bus full of school kids en route to summer camp. Cormier goes to town, cutting between Miro, the teen terrorist, & the cheerleader/bus driver. But the real fun comes in with Ben Marchand, teen son of a general at the nearby Army base. In negotiations with Ben's father, the Palestinians demand the delivery of a message by an innocent messenger. Ben is nominated.

But after delivering the message, Ben is also taken hostage. The Palestinians torture him, and Ben reveals that he'd inadvertently overheard plans made for the troops to storm the bus at 9:30. The attack actually comes at 8:30. Ben's father, knowing his son would crack under torture, fed him the wrong time. Although the rescue is successfull, both Ben & his father are doomed. Only Miro escapes, and is last seen about to strangle a motorist in order to steal his car. He will live to fight again for the homeland he's never seen.

BEYOND THE CHOCOLATE WAR, while laboring under the weight of its sequel status, is still good. After all, there is a law that limist fundraisers ending in riots and near-homicide to one per parochial school per year.

Instead of inflicting Trinity with a contrived crisis, Cromier simply extrapolates the after effects of the Chocolate War through the end of the school year. There is more than enough realisticly typical savage adolescent behavior plus the added bonus of Archie being Archie. If only more sequels were this good.

This quartet represents the bleak, dark, hardcore Cormier. Unfortunately, his other books are evidently upbeat by comparison. His other two YA novels, FADE and THE BUMBLEBEE FLIES ANYWAY, while pretty good, are nowhere nearly as grim or great (in my humble opinion). Beginners are also advised to avoid his three adult novels (A LITTLE RAW ON MONDAY MORNINGS, NOW AND AT THE HOUR, and TAKE ME WHERE THE GOOD TIMES ARE) if they're expecting heavy duty adoloescent angst, which is also lacking in his one short story collection, EIGHT PLUS ONE. It's not that his other books are bad, they're just different: nice, mildly sentimental tales of the "little people" without all that great fatalism. They'll do nothing to sate the blood lust of your inner child.



The Indianapolis Torture Slaying: Sylvia Likens' Ordeal and Death

by John Dean

(Bee-Line, 1966)

The Indiana Torture Slaying is the crown jewel of my crime collection. The subject is what I consider the classic American child abuse killing: Sylvia Likens. And the book is obscure enough to warm the cockles of the coldest bibliophile's heart. Published by a cheapo Cleveland publisher that specialized in paperbacks like *Pussycat Named Desire*, it's mass market in format only; certainly not in press run or distribution. Few copies appeared to ever make it out of the Midwest. But, in spite of its sleazy associations, it's a good, solid, straightforward crime book.

The story should be familiar to all long-time MCBF readers (see #2). But, to refresh your memories: Sylvia Likens was 16, a typical Indianapolis working class teen. Her parents entrusted her and her teen sister to the care of one Gertrude Baniszweski (pronounced Ban - i - shef - ski) while they worked the carnival circuit in 1965. Bad move. Over the next several months, Gertie and her kids took a strong dislike to Sylvia. Frequent beatings evolved into a full-fledged regime of abuse and torture. Sylvia was thrown down stairs, starved, tossed into scalding baths, and forced to drink urine. They used her as a human ashtray and carved "I am a prostitute and proud of it" on her stomach. She finally died during a beating in late October. Gertie and the brood tried to blame it on a "gang of boys" Sylvia had "run off with", but her sister spilled the beans.

Although the only other book on the case, Kate Millet's *The Basement*, is pretty good and much easier to find, Dean is not to be overlooked. Unlike Millet, Dean got his material first-hand, covering the trial for the *Indianapolis Star*. He was even called as a witness, but never testified.

For the quickie crime book it is, he does a good job. He thoroughly re-creates the crime and the bizarre cast of characters and does a good number on the fundamental question: Why didn't Sylvia (or her sister) try to get help? His straightforward, objective report is a refreshing alternative to Millet's compulsive feminist theorizing and endless attempts to live up to her subtitle: "Meditations on a Human Sacrifice". There isn't much divergence in facts between the two, no doubt because Millet wrote her book with *ITS* at her elbow. But *ITS* rings more of the crime and less of the author.

In all, *The Indiana Torture Slaying* is a surprisingly good book considering its publisher. I figure the mainstream houses of the time were too horrified by the case to touch it and Bee-Line got it by default. With The Basement making its own way to obscurity, some bright soul could do well be bringing back *The Indiana Torture Slaying*.

READ HARD OR DIE

WOMEN WHO LOVE MEN WHO KILL by Sheila Isenberg (Simon &
****true crime**** Schuster, 1991)
It's always nice to see pure tabloid TV preserved for posterity in hard covers, and let's face it: everyone must own this book for the title alone. Unfortunately, Isenberg doesn't transcend the topic's tabloid roots. It's more like an indepth Donahue interview (if you can imagine that) with a little pop psych motivation thrown in. Nonetheles, anything about anyone marrying someone on Death Row is bound to be fun reading. And it's nice to know that all those personal ads placed by "incarcerated SM"s aren't a waste.

UPON OTHER FIELDS ON OTHER DAYS by Jim Koger (Long-
****sports**** street, 1991)
Now, if this isn't a product of an unwittingly twisted obsessed mind, I don't know what is. In the words of the dust jacket, " this unique volume commemorates the more than 2300 college football players who... were either killed, reported missing, or taken prisoner in the service of their country". (Incidently, the big winner is Montana State,who lost their entire 1940 starting line-up in WWII). The big question is: Why? Least we forget, there were no playing fields at Eton until well after Waterloo.

FBI MOST WANTED: AN ENCYCLOPEDIA by Michael & Judy Ann
****true crime**** Newton (Garland, 1989)
This compendium, on the other hand, makes much more sense: short bios of every crook to make the FBI's "Most Wanted" list. Although limited in usefullness to the average crime buff because so many of the honorees were truly small time (two-bit stick-up men, car thieves & the like), it's a must for any hardcore collector. It's also fun to trace the escalation of truly serious crime over the years.

THE MILWAUKEE MURDERS by Don Davis (St. Martins, 1991)
MILWAUKEE MASSACRE by Robert Dvorchak & Lisa Holewa
****true crime**** (Dell, 1991)
They arrested Jeffrey Dahmer in July. These books came out in October. Aren't instant paperbacks wonderfull? Of course, they're obviously rush jobs, short on style & substance & long on padding -- MASSACRE even reprints the criminal complaint verbatim -- but they're about the one & only Jeffrey Dahmer & are thus vital. Of the

two, MURDERS is better, but the budget-minded may wait for the post-conviction flood. These books had to back off on the cannibalism.

LIFE IS A LONELY PLACE by Elizabeth Ryan (SBS, 1980)
****teen alcoholism****
There's no drunk like a teen drunk, I always say, & these five allegedly true ethanol-soaked first person accounts bear me out. They're great fun, even if they all come to the same unhappy AA ending. Unfortunately they are interspersed with general chapters bemoaning the evils of simultaneously drinking, driving & doing drugs. But then, you shouldn't have to pay more than a quarter for this one.

OTHER PEOPLE'S MONEY by Donald R. Cressey (Wadsworth, 1971)
****white collar crime****
A fairly heavy duty sociological study of embezzlement which is not without its rewards. The most interesting conclusion is that the embezzlers studied, to a man, maintained "they were only borrowing" or some other equally wild rationalization. Just stick to the case histories & skim over the more jargon-laden parts.

THE GALAPAGOS AFFAIR by John Treherne (Random, 1983)
****true crime****
This was a big story in the '30s when an uninhabited island in the Galapagos was settled by a crackpot philosopher, a homesteader, & a "sex-mad baroness". Crime came to paradise when a couple of them got killed & a couple vanished, leaving behind a nice little unsolved mystery. Treherne does a nice job retelling the story & even suggests a good solution. Recommended.

KINGS DON'T MEAN A THING by Arthur Bell (Berkley, 1979)
****true crime****
Knight-Ridder newspaper chain heir John Knight III was killed by his favorite street hustler, who was in turn offed a few days later. A strange story & Bell does an ok job in digging up the dirt. As an added bonus, with Bell's "participatory journalism" (or whatever he calls it), we a treated to descriptions of the writer sodomizing his sources. Hey, I bet William Roughead never had to do that.

MISSING BEAUTY by Teresa Carpenter (Zebra, 1988)
****true crime****
True crime writers seem to be in a page-count race these days, & I'm falling by the wayside. These books are getting way, way too long and are completely out of proportion to the crimes they cover. Take this one. Case is the Professor William Douglas/Prostitute Robin Benedict killing. Linda Wolfe did a beautiful job in just over 100 pages in THE PROFESSOR & THE PROSTITUTE. Carpenter lost me around pg. 315, with another 285 to go. Too much detail with far too little involvement.

ADVENTURES OF A SAN FRANCISCO NEWSMAN by Baron Muller
****newspaper nostalgia**** (DCIF Press, 1990)
Muller is an old-time SF reporter (duh!) who covered several interesting local cases over the years. I've been thus looking for this one for a while. What a disappointment! I was expecting full-blown accounts, complete with stuff unfit for publication in a family newspaper. Instead, he still sounds like he's trying to fit it in 5 column inches for the 13-year old mind of the newspaper reader. Oh well -- at least it's not bad as nostalgia.

THE DAY THE MGM GRAND HOTEL BURNED by Deirdre Caakley & Co. (Lyle S., '82)
****disaster****
A great hotel fire does not a great book make. That "Co." refers in part to "the staff of the LAS VEGAS SUN" and that's exactly what this book sounds like -- a reprint of the newspaper coverage in toto, edited only to cut out the duplication and repetitions. I hate all those one-sentence paragraphs.

BEVERLEY HILLS: ANATOMY OF A NIGHTCLUB FIRE by Robert G. Lawson (OHio U. Press, '84)
****disaster****
Now, this is a good disaster book. Dilettantes may be put off by the at times dry style and the welter of technical detail, but who cares what they think? This isn't a two-bit house fire, but the sedond-worst nightclub fire in US history and any true disaster fan should be more than willing to wade through a few four-syllable words to get the whole story. Some things just don't fit in a 10-second sound bite.

MORE OF THE STRAIGHT DOPE by Cecil Adams (Ballantine, '88)
****general non-fiction****
More reprints of the immortal CA's "Straight Dope" columns. Although not quite as good as the first one (reviewed in #13), Cecil nonetheless successfully fields all the questions the teeming millions throw at him. I mean, this is one guy who knows everything. A necessary addition to any library of rational thought.

THEY NEVER SAID IT by Paul Boller & John George (Oxford, 1989)
****reference****
I love the small but growing crop of books dedicated to setting the record straight, hopeless as a task as it may be. Subject here is quotes supposedly made by famous people, but actually misattributed, heavily edited, or just plain made up. Turns out Goering's "culture/gun" quote was lifted, Goldwyn's best written by press agents, & Jefferson's "governs least" plain made up. But my fave is the Hitler law&order quote used in BILLY JACK. Total fake. Yo, Tom! Can you spell research?

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